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Naming, Caste, and the Struggle for Equality

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Dropping offensive terms for Dalits without dismantling caste changes appearances, not reality. True dignity arises when communities name themselves, shifting from state correction to self-determination. India's challenge is confronting inequality, not soothing it with pity.

Names are never just words. They are ways of placing people in the world, of recognising or denying their dignity, of fixing their place in a hierarchy, or of allowing them to step outside it. Across histories of oppression, whether in caste-ridden India, segregated America, or apartheid South Africa, the struggle has never been only about rights and resources. It has also been about words, who has the authority to define others, and how those definitions linger in law, in memory, and in everyday life.

India's long quarrel with names is a reminder of this truth. For decades, words like “Harijan”, “Scheduled Caste”, and “Dalit” have carried competing imaginations of dignity. Governments and courts have issued circulars, advisories, and judgments striking out offensive terms. States from Kerala to Gujarat to Odisha have formally told their officials not to use “Harijan” in certificates or files. The Supreme Court has called it a term of insult rather than respect.

And yet the word persists in speech, in signage, and sometimes in politics. These episodes are not simply about vocabulary. They show that names are part of the very structure of caste, and that the power to name has been a field of contest as bitter as any struggle for land or representation.

India's Naming Struggles

The story of “Harijan” illustrates this politics with clarity. M.K. Gandhi introduced the word in the 1930s as a replacement for “untouchable” (Pyarelal 1956). To him, it meant “children of God”, a term of moral elevation, meant to erase stigma. But for those who bore the label, it sounded like another act of paternalism. Respect appeared not as a right, but as a gift.

Between Gandhi's gift and Ambedkar's refusal, between the state's category and the movement's assertion, lies the history of how Dalits insisted on the right to name themselves.

B.R. Ambedkar saw the problem immediately. In *Annihilation of Caste* (Ambedkar 2014), he warned that Hindu society would concede inessentials while preserving essentials. Renaming was easy; annihilating caste was hard. To call someone “Harijan” while leaving them at the bottom of the social order was to change the mask without touching the face beneath. What mattered was not gentler words, but the destruction of the structure that produced outcastes in the first place.

Dalit movements took the lesson to heart. They rejected “Harijan” as a word of pity, an act of false generosity. Instead, they claimed “Dalit”, a name that did not disguise pain but turned it into defiance. “Scheduled Caste”, the constitutional term, served another purpose—it created a legal identity linked to rights, reservations, and state protection. These were names claimed through struggle, not bestowed from above. Between Gandhi's gift and Ambedkar's refusal, between the state's category and the movement's assertion, lies the history of how Dalits insisted on the right to name themselves (Guru 2008).

Courts and States

If naming is a matter of dignity, then the law could not remain silent. Over the years, both courts and ministries have been drawn into the question of how the state should speak about its most oppressed citizens.

As early as 1982, the [Government of India issued a circular](#) to all states and union territories directing that terms like “Harijan” and “Girijan” should not appear in Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe certificates. The message was clear—benevolent or not, these were not neutral words but distortions of constitutional identity. The point was repeated in [2018 when the Ministry of Social Justice](#) instructed all departments to avoid “Harijan” and even “Dalit” in official communication, asking instead for the precise term “Scheduled Caste” (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment 2018).

Other states, too, followed this path. Kerala's Information and Public Relations Department in 2017 ordered that both “Harijan” and “Dalit” be dropped from all government communications, emphasising the need for consistency with constitutional language. The most recent instance is Odisha's 2025 order, which joined a long trail of directives already in place.

The judiciary has echoed this trajectory. In *Swaran Singh v State* (2008), the Supreme Court held that addressing someone by a caste name such as “Chamar” with intent to insult, and in a place within public view, would fall squarely within the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. The principle was not limited to that word; it established a broader understanding that caste-linked terms used as insult carry the weight of law.

Boards that still read “Harijan Basti” are common in villages, and politicians, including those in the highest offices, continue to use the word as if nothing has changed.

In 2017, the Court went further, observing that words like “Harijan” and “dhobi” are often deployed not as terms of respect but as abuse and derision, a recognition that reflected lived experience. *The State of Karnataka v. Appa Balu Ingale & Ors.* (1993) had already reminded the country that Article 17's abolition of untouchability was not symbolic, but a substantive guarantee of dignity. Together, these cases reinforced the idea that language is not innocent—a caste name can humiliate, and humiliation is a constitutional injury.

Even after decades of official instructions, the ground reality has hardly shifted. Boards that still read “Harijan Basti” are common in villages, and politicians, including those in the highest offices, continue to use the word as if nothing has changed. In 2024, for instance, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh publicly described a settlement as a “Harijan basti”. Dalit leaders and scholars immediately objected, calling the remark outdated and insulting.

That this kind of language survives, despite repeated circulars and clear judicial recognition of its offensiveness, shows how deeply paternalistic naming habits are rooted. Laws can ban a word on paper, but they cannot, by themselves, change the way society speaks.

Symbolism and Its Limits

It is tempting to see each new directive, from Delhi in 1982 to Odisha in 2025, as a sign of progress. Words are corrected, forms are edited, and governments appear responsive. Yet, the stubborn fact is that symbolic reform has always been easier than substantive change. To rename is to touch the surface; to dismantle caste is to pierce the structure beneath.

This gap is one Ambedkar anticipated. His warning that Hindu society would concede inessentials while preserving essentials has been borne out repeatedly (Ambedkar 2014, 23–96). It costs little for a government office to replace “Harijan” with “Scheduled Caste” on a certificate. The real cost lies in making sure that Dalit families are not denied housing in urban colonies, that their children are not segregated in schools, and that Dalit women are not forced into degrading or unsafe work.

Numbers make the contrast unavoidable. In 2022, the National Crime Records Bureau recorded almost 58,000 crimes against Scheduled Castes, more than in the previous year. A large share came from Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh. But these are not just figures on a chart. Each one stands for a beating, an insult, or in too many cases a life lost. They tell us something simple—changing the word on a government certificate is easy; stopping caste from showing itself in a lane, a classroom, or a police outpost is far harder.

Nelson Mandela's insistence on renaming places and institutions was not cosmetic; it was a part of undoing the grammar of subordination.

Cases like *Khairlanji in 2006* or *Hathras in 2020* reveal this disjunction in the starkest form. In both instances, Dalit women were at the centre of horrific violence, and the state's response was marked by delay, denial, or active collusion (Rao 2020; BBC 2020). These were not failures of terminology. They were failures of justice. They show that unless language reforms are tied to institutional change, proper investigation, prosecution, and conviction under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, the effect will be cosmetic at best.

Aurif Muzafar (2021) uses philosophical arguments of Milan Kundera to “differentiate feelings of generosity and purpose when it comes to the eradication of Untouchability.” He makes reference to Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness Of Being* (Kundera 1984), who described pity as a sentiment that affirms inequality while pretending to heal it. Philosophers of oppression have long cautioned us against mistaking gestures for emancipation. Similarly, Muzafar makes reference to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the*

Oppressed (Freire 2005), who called it “false generosity”—concessions that soothe conscience but leave power untouched. Both insights apply with force to the politics of caste naming. “Harijan” was framed as generosity; its persistence showed how little generosity can matter when not accompanied by equality.

Global Parallels

The struggle over names is not confined to India. Across the world, oppressed communities have fought to shed labels imposed on them and to claim the right of self-designation (Hall 1997). The stakes have always been larger than vocabulary—who controls the language of identity often controls the conditions of belonging.

In the United States, the shift from “Negro” to “Black”, and later to “African American”, marked more than a change of syllables (Smitherman 1977). Each term tracked a different political moment—“Negro” tied to a segregated past, “Black” to the assertion of dignity in the civil rights and Black Power movements, and “African American” to a demand for historical connection and recognition. The lesson was clear—communities must name themselves, not be named by others.

South Africa under apartheid shows the reverse. Here, [official vocabulary was used as a weapon of rule](#). Words like “Bantu”, “Bantustan”, and “location” were not neutral descriptors but part of a system of racial control. They classified, confined, and humiliated. When apartheid ended, dismantling this language was as necessary as repealing its laws. Nelson Mandela’s insistence on renaming places and institutions was not cosmetic; it was a part of undoing the grammar of subordination (Mandela 1994).

Similar struggles have unfolded elsewhere. [Indigenous peoples in Canada and Australia](#) have resisted colonial terms that erased their identities, demanding recognition of names rooted in their own languages (United Nations 2007). Each case shows how naming is tied to power—it can wound, exclude, and subordinate, but it can also resist, reclaim, and transform.

Seen in this wider frame, India’s naming battles belong to a global story. Gandhi’s “Harijan”, Ambedkar’s refusal, the Constitution’s “Scheduled Caste”, and the movement’s “Dalit” echo the same fault line—the difference between being named from above and naming oneself from below. The deeper lesson comes from history elsewhere—words can change the moral weather, but only structural reform can change the climate.

Conclusions

The fate of names tells us something stark about democracy—words can be retired by circulars, but hierarchies cannot. The easy part is renaming; the hard part is dismantling the conditions that made those names possible. “Harijan” disappears from a form, but caste remains in the street, the school, the field, and the police station.

India’s challenge is not whether it can remove offensive words from its official vocabulary. It is whether it can confront the structures that ensured those words survived so long.

To focus only on words is to risk confusing correction with transformation. A society that drops an insult but denies communities the right to define themselves has changed appearances, not reality. Ambedkar’s warning endures—caste will not vanish through reformist tokens, however well-meaning, but only through its annihilation.

This is why the politics of naming cannot be left to governments alone. They may proscribe terms, but only communities can author their own dignity. To recognise this is to shift the conversation from benevolent correction to democratic self-determination. The power to name must rest with those who have borne the weight of those names.

India’s challenge is not whether it can remove offensive words from its official vocabulary. It is whether it can confront the structures that ensured those words survived so long. Until that reckoning is real, every renaming will remain a gesture that soothes without shifting power. As Kundera observed, pity is never neutral, it affirms inequality even as it consoles. (Muzafar 2021, 28 n.44). What Dalits demand is not pity, but equality.

To close the book on “Harijan” is not to close the book on caste. The question that follows is the only one that matters—whether the republic can find the courage to move beyond words and deliver justice in substance.

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This article when first published on 25 September did not fully cite all sources for material used/cited in the article. The article has since been corrected to include all sources. The author regrets the earlier omissions.

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